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ABSTRACT

This is an account of student teachers' role concept based on the writings of 26 student teachers who completed their practical training in East London. Student teachers participated in a 13-week course of teaching practice combined with community work. Typical fears of these student were related to their ability: (1) to negotiate their circumstances; (2) to meet the grade; (3) to prevent discontinuity in their classrooms; and (4) to not get lost. Salient issues in student writings included: (1) communication and the national curriculum; (2) communication and racial and cultural diversity; (3) sexism, including equal opportunities; (4) urban regeneration; (5) school/community links; (6) crime; (7) finance; (8) paperwork; and (9) "burn-out." Students' first impressions were of the environment and people. School and community were equally prominent aspects of student writing, but concerns about teaching held greater weight. Results suggest that community work enhances teacher performance. This work allows student teachers to develop an awareness of the school in community context. This in turn helps them put self-critical tendencies about their teaching in perspective as they learn to better understand the limits of their practice. Contains three references. (JW)

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The Influence of Community Work on Student Teachers' Role Concept.

ED 388 444

Background.

This is an account of student teachers' role concept, based on the writings of 26 student teachers who chose to complete their practical training in East London and followed a thirteen week course of teaching practice combined with community work. Their previous training had taken place in suburban and rural schools; thus schools in East London represented a considerable challenge. Their fears, first impressions and the issues which they identify in schools and community projects, after the first week of the course are resumed in Table 1.

Fears	Issues	First Impressions
Self and Teaching 24	Self 3	
School 16	School 10	
Environment 6		Environment 25
Racism, different cultures 3	Racial & Cultural Diversity 14	
	Sexism 11	
	Community 4	People 15
		Atmosphere 9

Table 1.

Student teachers' fears, issues and first impressions at the start of their course in East London.

Typical of **fears** about themselves are : 'negotiating', 'fail to meet the grade', 'discontinuity' and 'getting lost'. Fears about school centre around discipline and control and getting on with other people, whilst racism and different cultures are seen as a separate category. The environment is potentially dangerous and certainly outside their experience.

The **issues** which the student teachers identify largely concern their professional training. School issues focus on communication and the national curriculum, whilst racial and cultural diversity is seen as restricting the children and communication with them. Sexism includes reference to equal opportunities, whilst community issues refer to urban regeneration, school/ community links and crime. Student issues relate to finance, paperwork and ' burn-out '.

First impressions are of the atmosphere, the environment and the people. The atmosphere is demanding, yet relaxed, the environment is noisy, busy and polluted, whilst people are characterised as relaxed yet disorganised.

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Student Teacher Thinking at the End of the Course.

These initial comments can be related to the students' subsequent thinking towards the end of their course, when they are asked to write about the effect of community work on their self concept as teachers. By this time, have come to terms with the material world, as seen in their first impressions, their potential inadequacy as seen in their fears and the social dynamics implicit in their responses on issues.

In this context, the group of students on whose comments this paper is based made 138 significant comments, 77 of which referred to elements relevant to any teaching practice, whilst 61 responses made specific reference to a course with community work, as Table 2 shows.

Topic	Number of Comments	Any Final Practice	East London Final Practice
Children	33	**	
Teaching	32	**	
Out of school experience	29		**
Diversity	19		**
Parents	13		**
Learning	12	**	

Table 2.

Numerical Categorisation of Student Teacher Comments on an East London final teaching practice with community work.

The near arithmetical equivalence of the two sets of responses shows that the balance of school to community work (3 days to 2 days) is right but suggests that one day's community work per week would be more like tourism, and probably be less effective. Comments about teaching, children and out of school experiences numerically outweigh comments on the broader issues, so the students see community work as furthering their teacher training. The categories of diversity, parents and learning are intrinsic in the data which raises the question of how well people can cope with inner city teaching, not having had this experience of community work. In any case, it can reasonably be concluded that community work is complementary to teaching and that the course enhances institutional training. Teaching preoccupations are uppermost but they are underpinned by an awareness of the wider concerns related to working within a specific community.

To test out these assertions more fully, a content analysis of all the students' statements was made. Whilst Table 2. treats the elements separately, showing identifiable and distinct units of learning in relation to experience, closer analysis shows that within each group there is a teacher centred element showing engagement in teaching, a community work centred element, showing an awareness of the school in its context and a number of responses where these two areas of experience are synthesised.

Topic	Engaged in teaching	Aware of school in its context	School context & engagement balanced
Out of school experiences	8	6	13
Teaching	14	6	12
Children	10	14	9
Diversity	11	4	4
Parents	3	6	4
Knowledge and Learning	9	0	3

Table 3.

Numerical category grouping of student teacher responses by type and theme of response.

The proposal, therefore, is that adequate teaching can come from treating teaching as a separate item, just as adequate community work can come from treating community work separately, but that there could be an engagement which leads to a greater probability of excellence if the two areas of experience are synthesised and interact synergistically.

Table 3. shows the way in which students' comments can be grouped as those concerning their teaching alone, those showing an awareness of their school in its context, and those where these two aspects of their experience are referred to simultaneously. Thus three distinct groups emerge :

- statements of adequate engagement
- statements of engagement and awareness of context
- statements where engagement and contextual awareness are balanced.

Student teachers whose thinking shows **adequate engagement**, although their perspective is teacher-centred, are nevertheless responding to the academic needs of their pupils within a particular community context. Those whose thinking shows **an awareness of the school in**

its context are becoming aware of counterbalancing factors to the culture of the school in the outside community. Student teachers whose thinking **balances the school context and their own engagement** are synthesising their approach to teaching and community work.

Topic	Engaged in teaching	Aware of school in its context	School context & engagement balanced
Out of school experiences	8	6	13
Teaching	14	6	12
Children	10	14	9
Diversity	11	4	4
Parents	3	6	4
Knowledge and Learning	9	0	3

Table 3.

Numerical category grouping of student teacher responses.

Student Teacher Priorities.

Taking the statements of those whose thinking shows **engagement** alone, the following order of importance emerges :

- Teaching : 14
- Diversity : 11
- Children : 10
- Learning : 9
- Out of School Experience : 8
- Parents : 3

Table 4.

Priorities expressed in the thinking of student teachers who show **engagement**.

Whilst the highest priority goes to teaching, as teaching is taking place in a multicultural context, diversity is an important element. The children, too, are a major preoccupation. Learning is readily identifiable, with out of school experiences being almost as important. For some students, a community work placement is the only time when higher education requires them to work outside its formal structures within their professional training programme. Parents have the lowest place in the scale of priorities, perhaps because these comments are essentially teacher-centred.

Comments from students whose thinking shows **an awareness of the school in its context**

produce a different scale of priorities, as Table 5. shows :

❒	Children	:	4
❒	Out of School Experience	:	6
❒	Teaching	:	6
❒	Parents	:	6
❒	Diversity	:	4

Table 5.
Priorities expressed in the thinking of student teachers who are **aware of the school in its context**.

Here the emphasis is on children rather than teaching, with out of school experience, parents and teaching all having the same degree of importance. Diversity itself is of less importance, presumably because out of school experiences and contact with parents provide ample opportunity to gain an understanding of the ethnic minority communities from which many of the children come.

Statements where engagement is evident show role interaction, in other words, that teaching is informing community work and vice versa in the immediate situation. The teacher and the community work role are separate but an adequate response to the expectations of each role can be anticipated.

Statements where awareness of the school in its context are evident show role permeation where circumstances can give rise to an alignment of teaching and community work. Thus, given certain situations, people in this group will respond as educators, stepping outside the defined role expectations of either community workers or teachers.

The third group of statements where **awareness of the school context and engagement are balanced**, demonstrate a role identity where teacher and community worker are fused, with the result that the self concept is synergised. Thus, people in this group not only show the characteristics of generic educators, but also those of simultaneous teachers / learners, whatever the context.

Community work does not crush excellence, according to the statements made by those who can balance engagement and awareness of the school in its context.

Table 6 shows the order of priorities for this way of thinking.

- Out of school experiences : 13
- Teaching : 12
- Children : 9
- Parents : 4
- Diversity : 3
- Knowledge and Learning : 3

Table 6.

Priorities expressed in statements of student teachers who **balance engagement and awareness of the school in its context.**

Out of school experiences largely concern gaining knowledge of pupils' background and circumstances, so that school can be more effective. They are typified by this kind of comment.

- making sure that the school environment is not a direct contrast to home.
- insight into the community and pupils' views and opinions.
- know about types of background children come from; I couldn't allow for their behaviour on these grounds but the knowledge does help to interpret certain actions and opinions.
- one should adapt one's teaching method and style, to some extent, to suit the needs and backgrounds of children.
- important for the teacher to be aware of the whole community.

Three comments concern the wider community:

- school and teacher are part of the community
- the role it is possible for the school to assume in unifying the community.
- pressures children have to face inside school and outside have shown me, through different eyes, the society that school is preparing children to enter.

All the statements imply the reconciliation of school and its requirements to the needs of pupils, needs which are seen essentially as stemming from issues in society. Whilst their prime task remains children's education, teachers and schools are seen as mediators between the children and their needs, the pressures in the community and the demands of society. Nobody is advocating a 'softies' charter, based on deficit theory, everybody is seeking to put knowledge of the community into more effective service on behalf of the children. There is more than a hint that school should play a role as a community agency.

Comments on **teaching** are less easy to categorise because several areas of experience, not necessarily implied by a teacher's classroom role, are mentioned. For instance, colleagues in school and community placements are influential :

- I have gained a lot from the other teachers' ideas, experiences and attitudes to teaching and the children.

An effective but flexible **relationship with children** is seen as very important, too:

- as a teacher, I have to be constant, yet always changing to adapt to their (the children's) developments.
- a teacher must adapt to changes of circumstance and fit teaching methodology to the needs of students.
- the more enriching experiences a teacher has, the wider her foundation is from which to help the children.
- to build up two kinds of relationships - in school and out.
- there is more to teaching than just teaching; you need to attempt to understand children.

The idea of a **'two way traffic' between community and school** is also evident:

- I have gained a lot of experiences I can transpose into the classroom.
- the placement has broadened my horizons as a teacher.

The **teacher's role** is also defined more broadly :

- (the project leader is a friend and role model to the children), so should the teacher be to her pupils, guiding them and supporting them through all life's experiences.
- What a teacher is, doesn't only mean a teacher of children but also a teacher of adults.

This broader interpretation of teaching encompasses not only children but adults and the wider community. It acknowledges that teachers need to widen their horizons, looking to colleagues, other professionals and other groups in society for experiences and role models in order to respond as flexibly as possible to their pupils by transferring knowledge gained outside their formal training into the classroom.

The same concept of broader role is apparent in the comments made about **children**; these focus on children's background, culture and individual needs. One comment encapsulates all three themes :

- my responsibility to the children in my class will extend beyond the

school gates - with the knowledge I should build up of their social background (which is) vital -..to respond sensitively to their individual needs.

On **children's background and culture**, students write of :

- (gaining) greater understanding of the type of children and their culture.
- teacher to be aware of children's background and social needs.
- (give children) opportunities for trying out new things not experienced in the home.

There is consensus on **individual needs:**

- teachers being sensitiye and responding to individual needs is essential (sic)
- be aware of the individuals for whom various aspects of school are disagreeable, if not intolerable.
- be aware that not all individuals can be expected to fit into the same system with ease.

There were two comments suggesting teachers had wider responsibilities towards children :

- interacting with children in a non-teaching role.
- the more enriching experiences a teacher has, the wider her foundation is from which to help the children learn.

Again, the students are stressing the imperative of a wide brief for teachers, be it on an individual or group level, seeing themselves as responsible for acquiring experience for, and knowledge of, their pupils in order to enhance the latters' educational experience.

Students are aware of the vital role **parents** play in their children's education, seeing their responsibility as that of communicating with parents in order to avoid misunderstandings and to gain an appreciation of parental concerns:

- contact with community members and parents and their real concerns
- parents need to be included in educating their child. -
- (the) importance of working and communicating with parents, so as not to allow rifts between home and school.
- explain policies and theories so they (parents) don't misunderstand you.

Students learn a great deal about **diversity** from the ethnic minority communities, coming to an understanding of the particular tensions children from these families experience in the British education system:

- learned from the Asian community, so the community has been my teacher.
- whether to force boys and girls to work together or whether to respect their religious beliefs.

One comment, whilst acknowledging the difficulties, also recognises the potential value of the many cultures present in schools :

- knowing about general attitudes, values and priorities of a culture and being sympathetic towards them, helps to alleviate misunderstandings, and means one can exploit the richness and variety of them in lessons.

The three comments on **knowledge and learning** suggest :

- transfer (community work) skills into (the) everyday classroom.

consider that :

- community work is unique and should be considered an integral part of teacher training.

and identify the crucial elements :

- the community concept is relevant and worthwhile in terms of integration of learning experiences.

Thus the integration of learning is the important concept underlying these comments, in conjunction with the idea that learning can be experiential as well as academic.

Analysis of Word Use : Shared Vocabulary.

An analysis of word use in the statements of student teachers whose thinking shows **engagement** and those whose thinking shows **awareness of the school in its context** suggests that there are areas of shared vocabulary within categories and across categories.

In comments on teaching, the most frequently used nouns are *clear aims* (2), *behaviour* (2), *needs* (2), verbs are : *to be aware* (4), *to understand* (2).

Understanding, *needs* and *behaviour* figure in comments about children as do *insight* (2). *Understanding* is mentioned four times in the group of comments on diversity, which also contain *insight* (3), *background* (4) and *culture* (6). *Background* is again mentioned twice in the group of comments on out of school experiences, together with *social problems* (2) and *insight*. Understanding, culture, needs, background, insight and awareness are all used in the group of comments on knowledge and learning.

Combining the frequency of word use in comments of students whose thinking shows engagement with that of student teachers whose thinking shows awareness of the school in

its context, produces the pattern shown in Table 7:

Word	Frequency of Use
understand(ing)	10
background	7
culture	7
insight	7
aware(ness)	6
needs	4

Table 7.

Combined frequency of word use in statements made by student teachers whose thinking shows **engagement in teaching with** those whose thinking shows **awareness of the school in its context.**

The order of priorities expressed in frequency of word use, seems consistent with the orders of priority established for this group of statements. If, for instance, the teaching role has a high priority, then a prerequisite is an understanding of the children, their background and needs. Students seem to be saying that community work allows them to understand children more than they would do on teaching practice alone. None of them has been penalised by it. Seemingly, community work allows people to make linkages of an ordinary nature through a highly significant experience .

Statements **balancing engagement and awareness of the school in its context** give rise to a different order of frequency of word use as Table 8. shows

Word	Frequency of Use
needs	7
adapt	3
experiences	3
background	3
community	3
understanding	2
child's learning	2
(education) system	2
integration	2

Table 8.

Frequency of word use in statements made by student teachers balancing engagement and awareness of the school in its context.

A comparison of the frequency of word use with that of the statements of those who are engaged and those who are aware of the school in its context, shows the following pattern:

Comments balancing engagement and awareness of the school context		Comments showing engagement combined with those showing awareness of the school context
Needs	7	4
Experiences	3	0
Background	3	7
Adapt	3	0
Community	3	0
Understanding	2	10
Child's Learning	2	0
(Education) system	2	0
Integration	2	0
Insight	0	7
Culture	0	7
Awareness	0	6

Table 9.

A comparison of frequency of word use in student teacher statements.

This evidence of student teacher thinking seems to suggest a progression from understanding and insights on culture and background, to awareness of needs and experiences, to recognition of the individual child within the system, to the importance of integrated learning experiences. Arguably, too, there is a logic in this hierarchy of comments, with students working from skills implied by their role (understanding), to the acquisition of skills (needs analysis), to emerging strengths (integration of learning experiences). The interrelatedness of this shared vocabulary is evident in the use of the same vocabulary in the teaching and community work contexts. Thus language forms the basis for a common identification of the teacher role and the community context.

For any professional in training, the final practical placement is a period of rapid learning of professional vocabulary, described by Greenwood (in Vollmer and Mills: 1966) as its *argot*. Student teachers in two placements are, inevitably, learning two sets of vocabulary, one based on the school and one based on community work. In their comments on community work and its impact on teaching, they show that their vocabulary, and thus their learning, is transferable from one situation to the other Moreover, community work underpins students' teaching role, supplementing the informal education gained through socialisation with teachers, community workers and their peer group. As community work and teaching become more contingent, they are able to make a specific contribution to professional clichés, casting through their own experiences to make

connections. Thus community work becomes a counterpoint for teaching. This learning process is not isolated or insulated but robust because each student's experience is independent and unique, showing the importance of building a degree of informality into courses of professional training, especially where a degree of conformity is implied in the professional role.

These data demonstrate a consistency of group achievement in terms of informal education. All the student responses contain some elements of shared vocabulary, yet as no one person follows the same programme and as there is a large element of choice within each placement, student learning is taking place at different rates and with different emphases.

This shared vocabulary also supports Hughes' (1958) proposition referred to by Lortie (Vollmer and Mills : 1966 : 99) that :

> 'professional education involves the replacement of stereotyped images by more subtle, complex and even ambiguous perceptions of the professional role'.

Generalisation.

These student teacher comments formed one section of a questionnaire on attitudes to teaching which was completed by 214 final year student teachers. This section of the questionnaire recorded the highest degrees of agreement of all the items as Table 10. shows. Degrees of agreement or homogeneity were arrived at by dividing the mean by the standard deviation. This method is described in detail by Desai (in Golding, P. (ed) 1986).

Many of the 214 student teachers who expressed agreement with these items had not had experience of community work during their training nor of teaching in an inner city area, yet they did identify strongly with these student teacher statements.

Therefore, the final proposition of this paper is that there is an important community dimension to the teacher role which can be enhanced by informal training experiences in the form of community work but which is largely discounted by initial teacher training.

Variable Name	Rank	Degree of Agreement
Teachers should be aware of:		
Ways in which children are influenced by their home environment	1	8.1
Issues affecting children's behaviour in school	2	7.8
Teachers must :		
Communicate with parents	3	7.27
Teachers should be aware of:		
The atmosphere & environment of pupils' lives	4	7.2
The school's role		
The school and teacher are part of the community	5	7.02
Teachers should be aware of:		
Pupils' views and opinions	6	6.9
Teachers must :		
Know pupils' backgrounds to interpret certain actions & opinions	7	6.67
Teachers should be aware of:		
Whole community issues	8	6.6
The school's role		
The school can assume a role in unifying the community	9	5.83
Teachers must :		
adapt their teaching method and style to suit child's background	10	5.82
The school's role		
Preparing children to enter a society full of pressures	11	4.5
Teachers must :		
Make sure the school environment is not a direct contrast to home	12	4.1

Table 10.

Degrees of agreement recorded on 'attitudes to teaching' items.

As Lortie (Vollmer and Mills : 1966 : 98) found in his study of law students, purely theoretical training leaves trainees surprised at their lack of preparedness and confounded by their unrealistic expectations of legal work. He comments thus :

> 'If we are correct in assuming that the self-concept crystallises only where role performance is undertaken in a psychologically meaningful context, the law school years provide minimal opportunity for this development'. (Vollmer and Mills : 1966 : 100)

One of the most deeply embedded cultural features of teaching is the growth and consolidation of teachers' fears about their own performance, encouraged by the training process which requires constant evaluation of teaching performance. These data suggest that community work enhances the performance of the average teacher and promotes

excellence in the more able. Opportunities to develop an awareness of the school in its community context may counteract this strongly developed self-critical characteristic as student teachers develop a more realistic concept of the potentialities of their teaching.

These student teacher comments and the degree of agreement expressed by their peer group seems to suggest that community work combined with school experience offers a psychologically meaningful training context. High teacher resignation levels in inner city areas suggests that initial teacher training based on school experience alone provides less opportunity for the self-concept of the inner city teacher to crystallise. Therefore, teachers have to rely on compensatory learning in post, rather than on complementary learning in training.

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